

GW Pharmaceuticals boss: Cannabis-based treatments could be used in autism

Justin Gover says GW's experimental drug for severe epilepsy also appears to treat symptoms of autism



GW Pharmaceuticals grows cannabis in a top secret location in the South of England Photo: GW Pharmaceuticals

By Denise Roland

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GW Pharmaceuticals is to investigate whether a cannabis-based medicine could treat symptoms of severe autism.

The British drugmaker, which develops medicines using cannabis extracts, is putting together the "building blocks" of a research programme into autism, its chief executive told The Telegraph.

Justin Gover said doctors treating severely epileptic children with GW's experimental drug Epidiolex had observed improvements in behaviour and brain function in those patients who also had autism.

He cautioned that the observations were "no more scientific at this stage" but that he saw an "important

role for GW in researching the use of cannabinoids within autism-like disorders".

GW has been testing Epidiolex in a few dozen children with debilitating forms of epilepsy in the US for around a year and has already seen "promising" results. It has done so under a so-called "expanded access" programme which allows patients with untreatable conditions to try out experimental drugs.

It recently embarked on a formal clinical trial of the drug across Europe and the US, which includes patients at Great Ormond Street Hospital in London. GW hopes to complete clinical trials by the middle of 2016 and launch Epidiolex in early 2017.

Analysts have previously suggested that Epidiolex could also be used in autism since the two conditions are closely associated. As many as a third of people on the autistic spectrum also have epilepsy. A recent study by scientists at Stanford University in California also suggested that compounds found in cannabis could successfully treat autism.

Mr Gover revealed his new research plans as GW released its full-year results showing losses widened to £14.7m in the year to September 30. These compared with a loss of £4.9m a year earlier and largely due to the company ploughing money into its Epidiolex programme, it said.

GW also posted a 10pc increase in full-year revenues to £30m, driven by a doubling in sales of the company's single product Sativex, which treats pain in multiple sclerosis, from £2.2m to £4.4m.

The group makes most of its income from fees charged to Japanese drug maker Otsuka, which has secured the exclusive rights to develop and market Sativex in the US. GW said Otsuka paid it £24.3m in the year to September 30 for its work in getting Sativex - which is currently unavailable in the US - approved for use in cancer pain.

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